

The UK referendum is a neverendum

The vote on Britain's EU membership is promised as a definitive end to the UK's lengthy and unsettling debate. **Richard Rose** explains why it will instead usher in more discussion and continuing uncertainty

A referendum is intended to settle a political debate by offering a straight choice on a controversial issue such as "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?" But the forthcoming UK referendum will do nothing of the kind. Whatever the outcome, the result will be just one stage in a never-ending process in which the UK drifts further away from mainstream Europe at a time when economic interdependence is drawing most EU member states closer together.

The UK's referendum is the culmination of a decade of pressure from eurosceptic MPs within the Conservative Party. Prime Minister David Cameron has never been engaged with the EU or understood its politics. His indifference was first demonstrated by forcing Conservative MEPs to withdraw from the European People's Party. It was spectacularly demonstrated in 2011 when his late-night demands in the name of British interests led to the UK's self-exclusion from negotiations about how to deal with the consequences of the eurozone crisis. The threat of the mass defection of Conservative voters to anti-EU candidates of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) led him to pledge a referendum on EU membership. Winning an absolute majority in last May's general election made it impossible for him to wriggle out of that pledge.

To appease both the Tory party's hard and soft eurosceptic MPs, Cameron has publicly committed himself to returning significant powers from Brussels to the House of Commons in Westminster. This is presented as a zero-sum conflict with the faceless bureaucrats of Brussels. If victory can be claimed, he will endorse a vote in favour of the UK remaining in the European Union. If not, he will recommend withdrawal. Leaked documents indicate that privately he wants Britain to remain in the EU, but the less he secures as concessions the greater will be the split in his own party.



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If a member government's demands are voiced in the name of the national interest, they are usually rejected. The UK's claim that it should be allowed to opt out of the EU commitment to the free movement of people between member states was a good example of that. By presenting a reduction in regulation by Brussels as in Britain's national interest rather than everyone's interest, Cameron has minimised his chances of forging alliances with other reform-minded member governments. The UK's desire to protect the City of London from the effects of eurozone policies addresses British anxieties about future eurozone policies. Although these anxieties are shared by eurozone member states, they will not allow a non-member state to veto actions they think needed to keep the eurozone intact. The symbolic demand for the UK to opt out of the Treaty of Rome's commitment to an ever-closer union can only be met authoritatively by a treaty change unlikely to occur until after 2020.

Downing Street believes that a ballot sooner will make a 'Remain' vote easier. The Referendum bill requires that a vote be held by the end of 2017, but a vote before Easter of that year is the latest date a referendum could be held without the additional confusion arising from the French and German elections. Britain will, furthermore, be chairing the European Council in the second half of 2017.

Domestically, the prime minister has played on Westminster's ignorance of Europe and EU matters to portray trivial or counter-productive incidents as triumphs. His cordial personal relations with Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel have been exploited as showing that Berlin will ensure Brussels delivers what Cameron wants. A whirlwind series of phone calls and flying visits this year to the other 27 members of the European Council has been portrayed as a successful bid to win influence, even though the only visible gains are favourable headlines in Britain.

Most member states are probably prepared to discuss concessions with the UK, but it is not their only priority. At the mid-year European Council meeting, Cameron was given ten minutes to present his thoughts – one continental leader described this as good for a toilet break. The post-Council communiqué devoted 25 words to his statement and said the issue would be looked at again in December.

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Belatedly, Britain's prime minister has realised he cannot achieve substantial concessions from Brussels in time for his self-imposed commitment to an early referendum. To avoid having to admit failure, he has been slow to define the changes that he regards as sufficient to justify a Remain vote. This tactic is designed to enable Cameron to claim for domestic consumption that whatever powers can be reclaimed are what he has wanted all along, however limited they turn out to be.

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Cameron is committed to presenting whatever he gains as a triumph, but the anti-EU Conservatives in parliament and the media will define it as falling well short of what they want. Their first line of attack will be that the package contains few actual changes in EU rules and a lot of statements about the intention to consider British concerns in ongoing deliberations about the eurozone, migration and an intergovernmental conference on treaty change. A second line of attack will be the familiar refrain that today's EU is not the EU that Britain joined in 1973. Since the few fig leaves that Cameron secures will not protect the UK from the EU's inherent moves toward an ever-closer union, eurosceptics will argue that the sooner Britain gets out of the EU the better.

The reductionist nature of a 'Stay or Go' vote on membership means that the details of negotiation will be less important than the broad political picture. That will be confused by the split in the Conservative Party. A yet to be determined number of Cabinet Ministers and MPs will publicly come out for a 'Leave' vote, and so will a significant portion of the 37% of the electorate that voted in May for the Conservative government. The Labour Party, itself in the toils of an ideological civil war in which EU membership is increasingly contested, will probably try to avoid official engagement. But trade unions opposed to the eurozone's austerity policy can put their money behind the Leave campaign. UKIP will campaign for a Leave vote from working-class voters left behind by globalisation.

The most committed advocates of EU membership are business people. Insofar as the British economy is doing better than those of continental EU countries, this will increase their personal authority but will also strengthen the case made by anti-EU businessmen who argue that the UK economy is strong enough to do well or

better outside a political union that gives priority to saving the euro. Business leaders may have money but they have little expertise or taste for campaigning. The Scottish National Party is set to be the leading party in the UK that will campaign for a Remain vote; it wants Scotland to stay in Europe but leave the United Kingdom. The lack of the major parties' enthusiasm for campaigning will keep the referendum turnout low, and if the uncertainties of withdrawal produce a risk-averse vote for remaining in the EU as the lesser evil, it will be a shallow commitment to membership.

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Whatever the outcome, the never-ending debate about Britain's engagement with the EU will continue. Even if it's a vote to remain, Conservative MPs will challenge Cameron to harass Brussels to deliver the repatriation of powers he claimed would be forthcoming. And the prime minister's announced decision to leave office before the next general election is already opening an internal competition to succeed him. Contestants divide between those who are vociferously anti-EU and those who express more doubts than commitments about British engagement with Europe. If UKIP can use the referendum campaign to compensate for its lack of seats in the House of Commons, it will exert fresh pressure on Conservative MPs to represent anti-EU voters rather than defend Cameron's achievements.

This referendum will not be the end of the story. If any EU measure is deemed a transfer of sovereign powers under criteria laid down in the UK's 2011 European Union Act, this will trigger another referendum about whether the United Kingdom should adopt it. The additional power need not be the result of a treaty change; it can be the result of Qualified Majority Voting in Council or the accidental by-product of legislation.

An increasingly introverted cohort of British political leaders will hope that British economic success can distract attention from the debate about the EU. However, silence has its costs. It means that the British government has no answer to the challenge that former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson voiced more than half a century ago when he said Britain has lost an empire but it has yet to find a role. ■